

The Chief of Staff's Book of the Quarter

A Few Great Captains, DeWitt Copp



While the Royal Air Force won its struggle for independence by 1918, the US Army Air Corps wouldn't win the same battle for almost 30 more years. A Few

Great Captains is the story of the foundation of the Air Force and its struggle for independence. DeWitt Copp has written a fascinating page-turner that tells this story from the perspective of those airmen who were in the thick of this struggle—particularly Billy Mitchell, Benny Foulois, Frank Andrews, Hap Arnold, Carl Spaatz, and Ira Eaker.

A primary reason for this book's placement on the CSAF's Reading List is its fascinating insight into the personalities, political fights, aerial feats, assignments and family lives of what have now become legendary airmen. Copp provides us a personal and biographical glimpse into who these trailblazers were and what made them tick. You will discover that these men were risk takers and pioneers who pushed the envelope (many times risking their careers); Copp captures and shares many anecdotal and highly personalized accounts of their engrossing careers.

A Few Great Captains briefly covers a number of issues and events including the court martial of Billy Mitchell, the Pan American goodwill flight, the Question Mark aerial refueling flight, and the story of the air mail fiasco. Copp also tells the lesser-known story of Frank Andrews, the first commander of the General Headquarters (GHQ) Air Force, who educated Gen George C. Marshall in the capabilities of air power. While many senior members of the General Staff were eager to get rid of Andrews, Gen Marshall promoted Andrews and made him the Army's Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations and Training—the first airman to attain such heights in the War Department power structure. After reading about the aspiring career of Gen Andrews, one can't help but wonder to what heights he might have risen were

it not for his untimely crash into an Icelandic mountain.

Appropriately, the title of this book is taken from a remark made by Gen Marshall: "No army produces more than a few great captains."

The author gives equal treatment to our only five-star general, Hap Arnold, the salty, dedicated, and efficient officer with a healthy sense of humor and a fiery temper. Arnold, unlike his alter ego Carl Spaatz, appeared to act frequently on impulse, especially when angry. A Few Great Captains traces the steps of future Chief of the Army Air Forces from his hell-raising days at West Point and his exile from Washington during the 1920s to his ascent to Chief. Arnold's exile, almost a court martial, was the result of his support of Mitchell and his fervor for air autonomy. However, Arnold's career proved to be remarkably resilient, partially due to both his old friend Douglas MacArthur and a tempering of his zeal towards a separate air force.

There are a few avoidable errors in names, ranks and grammar, and the book lacks complete documentation of sources. However, these small shortcomings should not detract from its value. It is an excellent starting point for understanding our rich heritage (no prior knowledge is needed to understand this book) and a great foundation for all military and civilian USAF members. Many reviewers have hailed it as a book "you cannot put down."

Editor's Note:

Each quarter, one of the books from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force's Reading List will be spotlighted as the book of the quarter. Air Force members of all ranks and grades are encouraged to read the featured title available at all Air Force libraries. For details on forming a book discussion group visit the CSAF's Reading List web site: www.af.mil/readinglist

"Exceedingly readable—the sort of book you can't put down..." Lt Gen A.C. Gillem, USAF (Ret)
former Air University commander

"The best book on the subject...I have no hesitancy in recommending it."
Senator Barry Goldwater

"An outstanding account..." Gen Curtis E. LeMay, USAF (Ret)